DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 073 508 CS 500 174

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TITLE "Civil Rights in Northern Ireland: By Damn! We've Got Their Attention Now!"
PUB DATE Dec 72
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Assn. (58th, Chicago, December 27-30, 1972)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Civil Disobedience; *Civil Rights; Culture Conflict; Demonstrations (Civil); *Mass Media; Political Attitudes; *Political Issues; *Religious Conflict; Religious Discrimination; *Social Action; Social Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Northern Ireland

ABSTRACT

The author discusses how the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland captured international public attention during the 1968-1969 period, through some of the rhetorical efforts of its leaders. Prior to 1968 the Irish Republican Army movement faced problems of apathy among its followers and neglect by governments of both Northern Ireland and England. Leaders then decided that dramatic action was required to give the movement more necessary television exposure. In 1968, therefore, they embarked on strategies of agitation and confrontation, which attracted the attention of the media, especially when the Northern Ireland government overreacted to the situations. With their expanded visibility I.R.A. activists began to exercise some degree of sophistication in their use of the media to exploit the government reactions and win international sympathy for their cause. (Author/RN)

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"CIVIL RIGHTS IN NORTHERN IRELAND: BY DAMN! WE'VE GOT THEIR ATTENTION NOW!"

Presented at the Convention of
the
SPEECH COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION

December, 1972

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The dilemma faced by civil rights activists in Northern Ireland prior to October, 1968, was not a particularly unusual one for those concerned with changing the status-quo: they were ignored by the establishment, had limited resources and virtually no access to regular, parliamentary channels to promote their objectives. Thus, new strategies and tactics had to be utilized that would call attention to their grievances and force the establishment to deal with their demands.

The discussion will first examine the problem of Northern Ireland in terms of the sources of Catholic-Protestant conflict and the grievances of the Catholic minority; next the nature of early civil right rhetorical activity will be briefly explored. This serves primarily as a contrast to the media exploitation strategies which will provide the bulk of the paper.

Why, first of all, the need for civil rights agitation? Here, the historical background is exceedingly complex. It goes substantially beyond the conception of two communities bitterly divided over religion. The religious labels conveniently identify disparate cultures and national identities.

When Northern Ireland was established in 1920, Catholics, feeling bitter and betrayed, deliberately opted out of the system and the entire state was erected without their participation. This meant that imbalance was built-in fixture. Successive Unionist governments, far from attempting to ameliorate the problem of a deeply divided community, took steps to exacerbate it. Worse, these behaviors were deliberate. Theirs was a paranoid political system built on the conception of the Catholic minority as a threat to the State and an occasional border raid by IRA gunmen reinforced this seige mentality. Obviously, there were--and are--some real grounds for Protestant anxiety at any prospect of incorporation into a

united Ireland--the pervasive influence of the Roman Catholic church not least among these.

But active Protestant contempt for Catholics in Northern Ireland goes beyond many of the reasons currently advanced. Rather, I think, Macaulay put it well when he observed that Ulster Protestants exhibited "The faults which are ordinarily found in dominant castes and sects." The "caste" designation is appropriate--an anxious sense of superiority with its origins in the early seventeenth century Protestant colonization of Ulster. Irish Catholics were considered inferior beings then and something of the same attitude remains today.

But some attitudes change. In the Catholic community, the early 1960's marked the emergence of a larger, better educated Catholic middle class. This group was less prepared to acquiesce in the acceptance of assumed inferiority or discrimination and more inclined to express the dissatisfaction of the minority generally. The main grievances included: chronically high unemployment in heavily Catholic areas; job discrimination; company rules; disenfranchisement in local elections; gerrymandering, which in many ways, was a key to many of the foregoing grievances; and the Special Powers Act, an extraordinary piece of legislation empowering the government to suspend habeus corpus, arrest and detain without trial and other harsh measures.

By the mid-1960's, there were several groups attempting to lobby for equal rights for the Catholic minority. Briefly, only two aspects concerning these early petitioning strategies need concern us here.

First, civil rights activists recognized the necessity of removing the spectre of Irish nationalism from their activities. To help accomplish this, they co-opted the "Ulster is British" motto of the Unionists. They

could then quite reasonably claim that, since all agree that Ulster is British, it follows that British subjects are entitled to British justice. The significance of this tactic is that it turned aside contentions regarding the state's right to exist. Indeed, it tacitly accepted that right, demanded performance in accordance with the norms of Great Britain and attempted to suggest that the Catholic minority's quest for equal rights was not a sectarian issue. Franchise reform, for example, would benefit many poor Protestants as well. This orientation was maintained in later agitations.

The second aspect of note regarding this initial civil rights activity was its obvious failure. Using traditional rhetorical means--such as pamphlets, petitions, speeches, deputations to Stormont and Westminster (which still had ultimate constitutional authority over Ulster)--the civil rights groups attempted to obtain action on Catholic grievances. Westminster had no desire to involve itself in Northern Ireland affairs and followed a "see no evil, hear no evil" attitude. Stormont simply ignored them. As Martin Luther King once remarked, privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily.

By early 1968, the frustration of those working for greater minority rights was rapidly growing. The uselessness of arguing, petitioning and otherwise attempting to reach unresponsive governments--both Westminster and Stormont--was all to clear. Needed were bolder strategies drawing attention to civil rights issues.

The initial agitation was primarily local--it did not stir significant media interest outside of Northern Ireland and it focused mainly on the issue of discrimination in county council housing allocation. But it was quite significant in that it indicated how, given the appropriate tactics,

the media could be exploited.

A young Catholic Stormont M.P., Austin Currie, along with several others, set out to create an incident dramatizing housing discrimination in the Dungannon County Tyrone area. Early in 1968, Currie arranged for two Catholic families to each illegally occupy council houses in the village of Caledon. One of the squatting families moved and the Unionist county council allocated the house to an unmarried, nineteen-year old Protestant woman who just happened to be a local Unionist official's secretary. Under no conditions could she have been regarded as a priority tenant. Nevertheless, the young woman took possession of her house, right next door to the remaining family which had been served notice to either vacate or be evicted. Currie, amazed at the unbelievable stupidity or arrogance--most likely both--demonstrated by the Unionist council, siezed the opportunity. Thus, a few days later, the authorities arrived to evict the Catholic family who, following Currie's coaching in non-violent, passive resistence, laid down and had to be carried out. Cameras from Ulster Television and B.B.C. Northern Ireland recorded the scene and viewers saw one Mrs. Goodfellow, her three children and all of their possessions deposited on the street in front of the unmarried Protestant's house. It was, Currie related with satisfaction, "good emotive stuff."

As a first, relatively modest attempt at utilizing a media exploitation strategy, the Caledon incident had worked beautifully, as long as the tactics were non-violent, it was apparent that the establishment conceivably would demonstrate a degree of unsophistication in dealing with the situation. This, in turn, created the possibility of dramatic conflict attractive to the media. There were definite possibilities here.

With the successful Caledon agitation behind them, Currie and several of his colleagues approached the fledgling Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association with the idea of their sponsoring a protest march between the towns of Coalisland and Dungannon, an area plagued with injustices.

The question was, how to structure this agitation to obtain the greatest possible media exposure? Marches in Northern Ireland were commonplace but their purposes were traditional and commemorative: Catholic marches marking the 1916 Irish rebellion, drangemen celebrating the Protestant victory at the Battle of the Boyne, etc. Hence, the proposed march had to be clearly apart from the normal sectarian processions, several tactics helped achieve this end.

First, the sponsorship of the Civil Rights Association provided the important identifying label. They wanted to be identified as marchers for civil rights, not Catholic Rights. As much as possible, sectarian labels were to be avoided. An even more important tactic, in terms of both its symbolic and practical value, related to the march route. The destination was the Dungannon city center which meant the march would pass through a Protestant area--by custom off limits to Catholic processions. Organizers saw the route as an important symbolic gesture underscoring the difference between their activity and traditional sectarian marches.

In terms of more immediate, practical benefits, the proposed route almost assumedly would result in authorities banning the procession or rerouting it. By adamately refusing to be rerouted, which the organizers did, they created the potential for dramatic conflict and the assurance of media attention.

Organizers were very much concerned that their image be that of reasonable, non-violent demonstraters. If violence came, it was important

that it came from the other side. So to the surprise of everyone, nearly 4,000 participated and the demonstration proceeded as far as the police barricades where participants staged a peaceful sit-down meeting. As one indication that the American protest model was not far out of mind, the meeting closed with the singing of "We Shall Overcome."

The success of the Dungannon march prompted a group in Londonderry, Ulster's second largest city, to organize a similar protest there. From the outset, it was apparent that the outcome of events in Derry would likely be different. The city is a potent symbol in Ulster Protestant mythology and whereas local authorities were in control in Dungannon, the Ulster Ministry of Home Affairs took an active interest in the intended Derry demonstration. The agitators, using the same march route tactic, proposed to demonstrate in the city center. The Home Affairs Minister, one of the most reactionary members of the Ulster cabinet, banned the march asserting that civil rights was just another I.R.A. offensive, only in different form.

The demonstration organizers, somewhat more militant than the Dungannon group, recognized this as the sterling opportunity to "expose the sham of Ulster democracy" while deriving full exposure for civil rights grievances. Thus, they maintained their resolution to proceed with the demonstrati

Media potential was recognizably high. Obviously, a newsworthy event was developing and activists cultivated contacts among sympathetic members of the British and Irish press. The potential visual drama insured the presence of television. The organizers, while maintaining their resolve, generally avoided inflammatory statements and stressed the non-violent nature of their proposed demonstration. As the march date grew nearer, they tended to speak less of specific issues and to concentrate instead on the

right of British subjects to peacefully and lawfully assemble to protest demonstrable injustices. This was a shrewd tactic in that British observers not informed on specific grievances were provided with a rationale general enough to identify with.

The details of the October 5, 1968 demonstration in Derry need not concern us. The general expectation that a tense, unsophisticated establishment would over-react was confirmed. Again, the all-important television camera documented the indiscriminate police violence, bleeding demonstrators and rampaging water cannons. Soon these images were on the world's TV screens.

More than anything else, the events in Derry accomplished the initial purpose of bringing civil rights grievances to broad, general attention. In the process, a civil rights movement was formed and energized. Harold Wilson's government was deeply embarrassed by the attention drawn to this small, backward corner of Great Britain with its outdated philosophies and repressive laws. For the first time in nearly a generation, Northern Ireland was thrust prominently back into British politics.

The events subsequent to this--the farm, direction and demise of the movement, the rebirth of the I.R.A. and present violence, are beyond the scope of this paper. However, several closing observations regarding this case study seem appropriate. In many instances, you no doubt noted the strategies and tactics discussed here were not particularly unfamiliar. I find this reassuring for it suggests the possibility of more precise theory construction regarding the rhetorical development and sustenance of social movements--theories applicable across cultural boundaries: For example, my case appears to have some obvious comparisons to the agitation-control paradigmn suggested by Bowers and Ochs. Obviously, close study of

many diverse agitation-movement situations will be required for us to reach theoretical sophistication. But there is no doubt this is the task before us if we hope, ultimately, to bring light to Mathew Arnold's plain, a plain "Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,/where ignorant armies clash by might."